DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 412 976 IR 056 703

AUTHOR Gross, Daniel D.; Walkosz, Barbara; Brumley, Bruce
TITLE Rhetorical Sensitivity: A Key Concept for Creating Successful Online Instruction.
PUB DATE 1997-04-00
NOTE 5p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Computer Uses in Education; Information Needs; Information Services; *Instructional Design; *Instructional Innovation; Internet; Multimedia Materials; *Online Systems; Rhetorical Invention; *User Needs (Information); *Users (Information)
IDENTIFIERS *Rhetorical Sensitivity

ABSTRACT

Rhetorical sensitivity is the "tendency to adapt messages to audiences." Unless communicators find a place of similarity between themselves and the audience, the communicators' intended effect loses potency. In order to present effective online instruction, instructors must imagine they are learners, or imagine they are new to online instruction. To begin from the perspective of an instructor or one familiar with online instructions is to fail to practice rhetorical sensitivity. The instructor must design each step of the learning experience with the learner audience in mind. Five interrelated components should guide online instruction in order for the instruction to be characterized as rhetorically sensitive: obvious--present the material on the first page in such a manner that even the most naive participant would make the right choices; consistent--the same online format should be used throughout the course; global--the audience is international, a global audience; dynamic--to keep the learner involved in the topic, the instructor needs to stimulate as many learner receptors as possible, and this can be done using text, pictures, charts, video clips, movies and the like; and open--the general curriculum needs to be created to include an open flexibility that will accommodate the novice as well as the advanced learner. Rhetorical sensitivity applies to the construction of educational messages on the Internet, and online instructors must think first of the receivers of their instruction. (SWC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

RHETORICAL SENSITIVITY: A KEY CONCEPT FOR CREATING SUCCESSFUL ONLINE INSTRUCTION

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Daniel D. Gross, Barbara Walkosz, and Bruce Brumley
Montana State University-Billings

CA_GROSS@VINO.EMCMT.EDU
CA_WALKOSZ@VINO.EMCMT.EDU
VOT_BRUMLEY@VINO.EMCMT.EDU

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Daniel D. Gross
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

ED 412 976

Rhetorical sensitivity is the "tendency to adapt messages to audiences" (Littlejohn, 1996, p. 107). The concept has ancient roots. Aristotle's notion of the enthymeme no doubt represents the first formal discussion of the concept (Aristotle, trans. 1991). By enthymeme Aristotle had in mind the notion that an effective communicator forms a speech with the common ground shared between communicator and audience. He goes so far as to argue that "all [speakers] produce logical persuasion by means of paradigms or enthymemes and by nothing other than these" (Aristotle, trans. 1991, 1356b). In other words, unless communicators find a place of similarity between themselves and the audience the communicators intended effect loses potency.

More recently, Hart and Burks (1972), who actual coined the term rhetorical sensitivity, noted that communicators may fall along a continuum regarding audience adaptation ranging from "noble selves" (that depict communicators who stick with their ideals) to "rhetorical reflectors" (that depict communicators who mold or blend with the audience). Between this two extremes are the rhetorical sensitive communicators. "Rhetorical sensitivity embodies concern for self, concern for others, and a situational attitude" (Littlejohn, 1996, p. 107). In practical terms, the rhetorical sensitive communicator frames messages with the audience and context in mind while attempting to communicate a given idea. Applying this concept to an educational context seems obvious. In other words, educational communicators who frame their lessons with the particular learner audience in mind are practicing rhetorical sensitivity, and we might add, will be more effective as learning guides.

To illustrate the power potential in practicing rhetorical sensitivity, we refer the reader to an incident from a recent popular novel and film by John Grisham called A Time to Kill (1989).[1] The novel/film concerns the case of a planned premeditated murder. Two young white men rape and leave for dead a young, black, teenage girl (Tonya). Though Tonya survives, her father, Carl Lee, plans to kill her attackers. He shoots and kills both men on the steps of the courthouse in front of numerous witnesses. During the closing argument, a young lawyer, Jake, addresses a gender and racially mixed jury. In the movie version, he asks the jury to close their eyes while he graphically describes the rape of Tonya. One statement in Jake's closing argument represents classic rhetorical sensitivity. He paused and said, "Now, imagine she's white." In so doing, Jake put himself in the jury's frame of mind. Jake was probably thinking that most southern juries may convict a black father who revenges the rape of his black daughter, but they will probably not convict a white father who is revenging the rape of his white daughter. Carl Lee was acquitted.

IR056703

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The notion contained in the phrase "now imagine she's white" is central to the notion we are arguing for in this paper. We are suggesting that in order to present effective online instruction the instructor most "imagine they are learners" or "imagine they are new to online instruction." To begin from the perspective of an instructor or one familiar with online instruction is to fail to practice rhetorical sensitivity. The instructor must design each step of the learning experience with the learner audience in mind. We believe that five interrelated components should guide online instruction in order for the instruction to be characterized as rhetorically sensitive.

OBVIOUS

By "obvious" we mean present the material on the first page in such a manner that even the most naive participant would make the right choices. So often when visiting web pages, we have been overwhelmed with the material we confront. Attention devices have their place, but if the creators/instructors of an online courses focus on attraction and not content much confusion can result for the first time user.

With the advent of online instruction and the use of multimedia in the educational context, a rumor has been circulated which claims that you can tell it's an educational edition because it's so boringly or unattractively constructed. We believe that if instruction is your goal then to error in the direction of boring is preferable to confusion. Place the most important selection like "Courses Offered" and "How to Register" in the most obvious position on the page. Also, ovoid visuals that distract from the content messages as highlighted in the two examples. We have all visited web sites that promise to lead us to online instruction only to be overwhelmed by visuals and endless texts that misleads the perspective student who wants to enroll in a course.[2]

CONSISTENT

By consistent, we mean that the same online format should be used throughout the course. This format provides access to course information such as the syllabus and assignments, to the instructor, to other students, and other online information. A student should know that when they log on they could find the information they need in the same manner each time. For example, access to URL's or web pages should be designated in standard HTML text format. Often, those new to online work are not aware that thumbnail photos or other graphic representations can be used as links and as a result, some students may miss these connections. Thus, any changes to the course
format, should be kept to a minimum during a semester. Further, instructors must also be consistent in responding to student's requests for email because students may become discouraged if they do not receive responses to their email messages. If instructors find themselves deluged by messages (and this can happen unexpectedly), remedies to this situation include: (1) creating a class listserve or (2) posting responses to all students. While this component of rhetorical sensitivity may seem self-evident, technological consistency is imperative to successful online instruction as technological applications become more complex.

GLOBAL

When distributing on-line instruction over the Internet it is important to remember that the audience is international, a global audience. Presenting instruction before such a diverse audience can present unique word usage and definitional challenges. One remedy is to provide a complete on-line glossary. One example of how thoughtless word choice can lead to difficulties if not rejection is the case of General Motors' (GM) Nova. GM exported the Nova to some areas in Central and South America under the Nova label, which in some cultures translates to "no go." The resultant lack of sales comes as no surprise. Betty Crocker had similar problems when they first took their cake mixes to the United Kingdom (UK). By using the same packaging they had used in the United States, the product was viewed as not homemade and not worthy for a good English homemaker. In like manner, the creator of online instruction must keep the notion of a global audience in mind. We suggest reviewing the information presented in any contemporary intercultural communication text, for example Global Culture (Featherstone, 1990).

DYNAMIC

In order to keep the learner involved in the topic, the instructor needs to stimulate as many learner receptors as possible. This includes text, pictures, charts, video clips, movies, etc. On-line education can accomplish this with much greater ease and efficiency than traditional methods of instruction. Educators must become in some aspects entertainers. Since the computer has become the textbook, the repertoire can be broad and are available online.

A good example of mixing various types of stimulation together is the Disney web site (www.disney.com). They use text, pictures, sound, movie clips, and even on-line games to inform and entertain people of all ages. The on-line games can either be played on-line or downloaded for play on your own machine. When creating dynamic on-line instruction, we need to remember allow for contribution and participation in both the depth and diversity of the resources utilized. This is similar to the way traditional classroom might gear the discussion to various individuals in the class. By so doing, learners will experience ownership.

OPEN

The general curriculum needs to be created with the average learner in mind but with a build in open flexibility that will accommodate the novice as well as the advanced learner. For the novice student the educator needs to provide additional resources and examples to enhance the understanding of the topic. For the advanced student the educator needs to provide a way for the learner to either work ahead or provide them with additional detail within the known topic. No matter how much additional resources are provided, some learners still will have problems and therefore educators need to create a way to provide timely feedback. One way to accomplish this is by using question forms within each topic and emailing an answer directly to the student. Another way is to create a "frequently asked questions" (FAQ) list for each topic.

Even with student driven instruction, instructors need to remember to provide a structure for the student. It is easy for the student to start and then lose their way. The more open the learning experience, the more important it is that a structure is there to guide the student.

CONCLUSION

Rhetorical sensitivity, though an ancient concept, applies to the construction of educational messages on the Internet. Perhaps, the focus of all of our suggestions can be summarized by stating that instructors must think first of the receiver of the instruction.

Perhaps while our suggestions seem self-evident, we know from personal experience that the transfer of course content into a new technological mode can often result in the both the mode and content superceding the original intent - which is to instruct. Therefore, though it may sound redundant, place our suggestions in front of you as you prepare for a world of online learning.

FOOTNOTES

[1] For online information about John Grisham, try www.bdd.com/grisham.

[2] We recommend selecting a search engine, like "yahoo" for example, and then type in "online education." Select one of the sights. We believe that you will be, as we were, overwhelmed with the confusion that can result (Reid, 1997, p. 38). We believe that many educators were not practicing rhetorical sensitivity as they created that educational web pages.

REFERENCES

Aristotle, trans. (1991). Aristotle on rhetoric: A theory of civic discourse. Trans. G. A. Kennedy, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Featherstone, M. (1990). Global culture: Nationalism, globalization, and modernity. Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage.

Grisham, J. (1989). A time to kill. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Hart, R. P. and Burks, D. M. (1972). Rhetorical sensitivity and social interaction. Speech Monographs, 39, 75-91.

Littlejohn, S. W. (1996). Theories of human communication (5th ed). New York, NY: Wadsworth.

Reid, J. R. (1997). Preparing students for the task of online learning. Syllabus, 10, 38-39, 41.